

Supporting Students Who Have Exceptionalities

Families have knowledge, observations, and experiences that are vital for understanding students. Parents are most aware of their child's strengths and areas for growth. That information is very important in deciding whether a student might have a special learning need and, if so, what can be done to help them access educational opportunities that will allow them to thrive.

- ▶ You should be provided full information about your child's education program in a clear and understandable way and in plain language, so that you feel able to make good decisions.
- ▶ You have a right to be involved in all decisions about your child's learning.
- ▶ You should be involved in the design of your child's learning plan. You can help identify the best responses to your child's unique needs.
- ▶ You and school staff should work together to make sure that strategies used to support your child at school and at home match. Consistency is very beneficial for children and teens who have exceptionalities.

Family support is key to the success of all students – and parental and family input is especially valuable when planning interventions to assist students who have exceptionalities.

What can schools do to support students who have exceptionalities?

Schools can establish structures or approaches that provide individualized supports and services for students who have exceptionalities – often called “interventions.” Schools should focus on helping all students learn – knowing that some students will benefit when learning opportunities are delivered in different ways.

Students who have exceptionalities should usually be educated in the classroom along with other students – which actually benefits all students. They might use special equipment, do things at a different pace, and have individuals help them with various tasks, such as taking notes or meeting behavioural expectations.

Sometimes, students who have exceptionalities might also spend some of their time in different spaces that offer a unique environment, such as a calming, quiet place when needed. Students also might spend some time out of the classroom getting help from specialists who can provide counselling, help with their speech or movement, or other kinds of assistance.

There is no common approach for all students.
Strategies must always be designed for each individual student.

What is most important? Offering all children and teens every opportunity for success, no matter what experiences, skills, and needs they might have.

Who supports students who have exceptionalities?

Many types of professionals and resource people may be involved in supporting students who have exceptionalities. Depending on what each student needs, some of the following people may be asked to help.

- ▶ **Principals:** make sure that school staff receive necessary direction, information, and support to ensure that all students are included and successful in school. Principals are responsible for organizing relevant professional development for staff, and they advocate for necessary resources. Principals are often part of a student's education team and involved in overseeing Individual Education Plans (IEPs).
- ▶ **Classroom Teachers:** observe students regularly, so they can help identify the need for an assessment and implement strategies that build on students' strengths to help them succeed. Teachers are responsible for creating respectful classrooms that reinforce the message that everyone belongs. If teachers don't know how to help a child, they must ask for appropriate assistance.
- ▶ **Learning Assistance Teachers or Resource Teachers:** may be employed in some schools to help classroom teachers. They may suggest strategies to support students, help with interventions, coordinate teams of professionals, and help the school set up structures to make sure all students can learn and develop to their full potential.

- ▶ **Education Assistants (EAs):** work with teachers to help students. They may work in a specific classroom, possibly with one child or with more children in groups. EAs are directed and supervised by a teacher or principal. They may help with personal care, learning activities, or therapy programs that have been designed by specialists. They may help students participate in social interactions and other school and classroom opportunities. EAs can also provide general supports under the supervision of a classroom teacher, so that the classroom teacher can provide one-to-one support to students who need it.
- ▶ **Doctors:** can identify physical and mental health issues that might interfere with learning. They can also recommend further medical testing and possible strategies to promote the well-being of students and families.
- ▶ **First Nations Education Directors, Coordinators and Family Resource Workers:** may help parents review relevant information, consult with professionals, and arrange appointments.
- ▶ **Education psychologists and psychiatrists:** assess students' development in order to identify their strengths and any challenges that need to be addressed as it relates to learning and the school environment.
- ▶ **Social workers:** can help identify resources and ways to support children, teens, and their families.
- ▶ **Audiologists:** can test whether and how students hear different sounds, which impacts their learning.
- ▶ **Physical Therapists (PTs):** diagnose and help promote healthy movement.
- ▶ **Occupational Therapists (Ots):** help students with daily living and self-care skills.
- ▶ **Optometrists:** test and help strengthen students' vision.
- ▶ **Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs):** help build students' listening, speaking, and communication skills.

It can sometimes feel overwhelming keeping track of everyone who will be working with your child. But over time their roles will become clear, and you can feel good knowing so many people are committed to helping your family.

More About the Role of Education Assistants (EAs)

EAs are critical for the success of students with exceptionalities. EAs often work directly with students who have exceptionalities, helping with some of their daily needs in school. EAs help students who have exceptionalities feel cared for and they help convey the message that all students belong in the school. Parents often report that the commitment and skills of EAs are key to their children's progress in school.

Given their importance, if an EA is assigned to work with your child, you may want to ask your principal the following questions.

- ▶ How much time is an EA going to be spending with my child?
- ▶ What will an EA be helping with? Will my child also have opportunities to work with other students and get help from the teacher?
- ▶ How will the EA be supported so they have the specific skills needed to work with my child?
- ▶ How is the EA assigned to other students / classrooms?
- ▶ What happens when the EA gets sick? How will an appropriate substitute be arranged?

It may also be useful for you and the school to discuss and monitor the relationship of your child and the EA.

- ▶ EAs can be invaluable in helping your child. However, if an EA is overly attached to a student, it may be more difficult for the student to build their independence and learn to interact with others on their own.
- ▶ Parents and school staff can discuss how to balance your child's need for adequate supervision and support, with opportunities for them to safely try things on their own or with help from their peers.
- ▶ Also, while EAs may help your child meet their learning goals, it is important to be aware that classroom teachers and Learning Assistance Teachers should be overseeing the curriculum, making modifications and adaptations, and monitoring your child's progress toward their learning goals.

Working With Teams Who Support Your Child

Your child should be at the centre of a team of people who work together to identify, design, and provide the supports and services your child needs to grow and develop to their full potential.

- ▶ Students should be involved with these teams in developmentally-appropriate ways.
- ▶ You also have invaluable information to bring to the teams. Do not underestimate your own knowledge and contributions.
- ▶ Many other people may bring important skills and knowledge to help your child, as well.

Different Types of Teams

- ▶ Schools may use a variety of specific names for the groups of people who come together to help students with exceptionalities. The specific people involved in the teams may also vary.
- ▶ The following types of teams may exist to help your child.
- ▶ *You have the right to ask the school about what teams are supporting your child and how you can be involved with any teams that are created for your child.*

An **“educational team”** includes all the people who work together to help children succeed in school. It may include teachers, EAs, therapists, medical professionals, counsellors, social workers, Indigenous workers, consultants, childcare consultants, etc.

A **“school-based team”** differs from an educational team. It is a small group of school-based personnel who come together regularly as a problem-solving unit to address a child’s specific needs. It often includes teachers, the school principal, and other professionals (e.g., counsellors, psychologists, speech and language psychologists) who discuss how to support students and the classroom teacher. Parents, the student (as appropriate), and representatives from community service agencies may also be included on a school-based team.

- ▶ If your child has a school-based team, you should be informed and you should provide consent for your child’s learning program. School-based teams are most successful when parents are included as partners.
- ▶ If you learn that your child has a school-based team, you may want to ask the principal or teacher the following questions.
 - Who are the members of this team? What are their roles? What types of assistance does each member provide?
 - How will I be involved in the school-based team process? How often will the team meet? How will I be informed of planning meetings?

A **“transition-team”** might be established to help your child make plans their life after high school. Your involvement with this team is also crucial.

Final Reminders

- ▶ You and your child's teacher, other school staff, and health and education professionals can work as a team to help your child or teen.
- ▶ Students who have exceptionalities achieve success when they are provided the right supports and are encouraged to reach goals that are designed especially for them.
- ▶ You have the right to ask any questions you have about your child's education.
- ▶ All children are unique. All children have a right to the best education possible. You can help make sure your child's needs are met by asking questions and being involved in planning their services, programs, and goals.